

Highlander Academy Outcome Evaluation
Program Evaluation Plan

Nyack College School of Social Work
SWK 628- Social Work Program and Practice Evaluation

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Highlander Academy Outcome Evaluation - Program Evaluation Plan

Describing the Program

Overview of the Program

Highlander Academy is an alternative high school that includes a self-contained therapy program for 9th-12th grade students. The students at Highlander are part of the student body of West Milford High School and are within the Special Education and Related Services (SchoolMessenger Presence, 2020). The students that attend this program can be classified as emotionally disturbed or multiple disabilities. For example, an emotionally disturbed student has a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – Inattentive Type and Oppositional Defiant Disorder. This inclusive program supports students' emotional and behavioral issues by providing them with additional accommodations and modifications so that their educational experience is successful. The program is rooted in respect and trust as they acknowledge and support each other's disparities and assets.

Highly competent high school special education teachers, child study team members, school social workers, nurses, and administrators are the program's foundation. The purpose at Highlander Academy is to partner with the local community and provide a learning environment that acquires experiences that build upon academic, social, emotional, and physical advancement of the student to support each individual with their post-secondary goals aspirations. Highlander also provides excellent clinical services, such as group and individual therapies, to meet mental health needs. The program also provides an incentive system and opportunities for students to participate in courses at the High School property. Highlander has high expectations for its students and empowers them to seek new opportunities to continue developing their strengths and post-secondary aspirations.

Program Setting & Location

Highlander Academy was created six years ago and is considered an off-site alternative school for high school students. This program is an in-district program located in a very rural setting in West Milford, New Jersey. West Milford School District rented the second floor of a building owned by a Roman Catholic Church. The building is secured with a high technology security system so that all staff members and students are safe. The second floor of the building consists of five rooms. Two rooms are classrooms where the students have their academic classes. One room is considered as the library. One room shares space with the nurse's office and the main office where the administrator and school nurse are located. The other room is where the school social workers are located and conduct their group and individual therapies. The basement of the building is where the students have their breakfast and lunch.

Highlander's Group Therapy Program Logic Model

Program Inputs	Program Activities	Outputs	Short-Term Outcomes	Intermediate Outcomes	Long-Term Outcomes
<p>Staff: Two Full-Time Clinical License Social Workers, One Administrator , One MSW Intern,</p> <p>Location: Classroom or Library,</p> <p>Equipment: Chromebooks ,</p> <p>Time</p>	<p>Social/Life Skills Training</p> <p>Group 1 Counseling (Period 1)</p> <p>Group 2 Counseling (Period 2)</p> <p>Group 3 Counseling (Period 3)</p> <p>Group 4 Counseling (Period 4)</p>	<p>Students participate in Social Skills Training & follows a curriculum each week</p> <p>45 minutes group therapy sessions with students 5 times a week</p>	<p>Increase student's understanding of group norms and rules.</p> <p>Demonstrates ability to communicate appropriately with group members.</p> <p>Gaining skills on how to identify and express emotions.</p> <p>Demonstrates ability to identify and utilize coping skills.</p> <p>Demonstrates ability to work on personal challenges and goals as they relate to group topics.</p>	<p>Improve in demonstrating group norms and rules.</p> <p>Improving skills to control their tongue and know what is and what is not appropriate language.</p> <p>Improving knowledge on how to manage their emotions.</p> <p>Improving knowledge on how to use coping strategies.</p> <p>Improving the ability to self-assess and use tools or interventions to overcome challenges and achieve their goals.</p>	<p>Successfully maintain norms and rules in society or working environment.</p> <p>Reduce inappropriate language in the community.</p> <p>Reduce emotional outbreaks.</p> <p>Successfully handle difficult emotions, decrease stress, and establish or maintain a sense of internal order.</p> <p>Build upon their strengths, obtain a job, & do not allow personal challenges to disable them.</p>

Program Consumers, Clients & Patients Served

Highlander Academy serves a diverse population with students of all ages between 14 and 21. The students come from all different types of ethnic backgrounds and economic status. The students' ethnic background is predominately Caucasian and Hispanic. The economic status indicates if the student has free breakfast and lunch during school. The student's schedule consists of eight periods, including a fifteen-minute breakfast time. The periods are approximately forty-five minutes. All the students must attend group therapy sessions every day for one class period in the mornings. Therefore, class periods one through four have group therapy sessions in place. Individual therapy sessions are incorporated into the student's Individualized Education Program, a minimum of twenty minutes per week. Some students get more individual therapy time when needed.

According to Smith (2010), the program evaluation field's parts include assessment, monitoring, and outcome-oriented evaluations. The Highlander Academy program is intriguing to the writer since all the attended students have different diagnoses or mental illnesses and different traumatic or mild environmental experiences. For instance, a student has undergone a traumatic childhood of being a victim of rape from her biological father. Thus, the student undergoes psychological, emotional, and behavioral obstacles. The student needs help on how to overcome those obstacles to succeed in an academic setting. Thus, there is another student who suffers from a medical diagnosis with stage five Chronic Kidney Disease. Therefore, this disease impacts the student's education because the student's medical issues result in reflux nephropathy and a neurological bladder that requires additional academic accommodations that cannot be implemented at the high school setting. As the reader can see, there is a wide variety of students

with diagnoses that need individual academic and mental health services to be prepared and equipped for the “real” world and function outside the least restrictive environment.

Characteristics of Program Staff

Highlander has a small, highly professional, and competently certified group of special education teachers that support the students in their subject areas. The subject areas include Math, History, Science, Personal Finance, Art, Gym/Health, English, Electives, and Transition to Career class. The teachers abide by the student's IEP's and follow the New Jersey Common Core Standards and graduation requirements. There are two certified clinical licensed school social workers that conduct mental health services, such as group and individual therapies. There is one registered nurse that responds to any medical needs or emergencies in the building. Thus, there is one highly qualified and experienced administrator who is the Supervisor of Highlander Academy.

Program Cost and Funding

The program costs approximately half a million dollars. This cost supports the salaries of six Special Education teachers, one certified nurse, one administrator, and two school licensed social workers. The cost also supports the technology services and products for staff and twenty-two students and transportation for each student. It was noted that if the student had to be sent out of the District to obtain successful educational services, it would cost the District between 40K-60K per student, plus 18K for transportation. However, since the students at Highlander are in-district, the Board of Education finances are being saved. Additionally, the Federal government contributes approximately ten percent of the funds to special education. The community's tax-paying members cover the rest of the costs.

Therefore, the tax-paying members provide the funds for the disabled students to have a thriving academic environment and services. Following DiFrancesco & Lawrance (2001), West Milford School District has maintained a high student registration level in the Medicaid program. Thus, the Special Education program receives payments for beneficial services through the Medicaid program, which would be refunded to the Board of Education at the end of the tax year.

Program Goals & Objectives

Highlander's group therapy session's mission is to provide students with social skills and life skills to use as tools when they graduate from the program. The goal is that the students use the tools they were taught to use them to achieve post-secondary aspirations.

Program Goal # 1: For students to successfully maintain norms and rules in society or working environment.

- **Objective #1:** Forty-five minutes of group therapy session is required for students to attend five times a week.
- **Objective #2:** For students to be aware of when inappropriate language is not acceptable, such as communicating with your boss or teacher, as well as talking disrespectfully to their peers.
- **Objective #3:** For students to increase their understanding of group norms and rules, so that students have the knowledge that they need to abide by rules and norms outside of the program.

Program Goal # 2: For students to successfully handle difficult emotions, decrease stress, and establish or maintain a sense of internal order.

- **Objective #1:** Forty-five minutes of group therapy session is required for students to attend five times a week.

- **Objective #2:** For students to gain skills on how to identify and express emotions, so that students can recognize how they feel or identify mood.
- **Objective #3:** For students to demonstrate ability to identify and utilize coping skills.

Program Goal #3: For students to build upon their strengths, obtain a job, & do not allow personal challenges to disable them.

- **Objective #1:** Forty-five minutes of group therapy session is required for students to attend five times a week.
- **Objective #2:** For students to demonstrates ability to work on personal challenges and goals as they relate to group topics.
- **Objective #3:** For students to recognize their strengths and gain confidence. Then, students can use their strengths to achieve their personal goals.

Purpose of Evaluation & Stakeholder Engagement

Highlander Academy's group therapy goal is to provide social skills and life skills training for students to use to function outside of the program. Group therapy values each student and seeks to help them achieve their personal goals and equip them to reach their post-secondary aspirations.

Purpose of the Evaluation

This summative evaluation study intends to address the effectiveness of group therapy on students. Thus, the research question is as follows: Are students using the tools and interventions taught in group therapy sessions to achieve their goals after high school. The following hypothesis will be tested:

Hypothesis 1: If group therapy is sufficient, students can use the taught social and life skills to transition well outside of the program and reach their post-secondary aspirations.

Summative evaluations are essential and provide important visions into a program's performance and outcome. For Highlander Academy, it helps provide the clinical school social workers on how to improve the program's services to become successful citizens in society. According to Smith (2010), an outcome evaluation focuses on assessing program goals and outcomes, its level of achievement, and its efficacy and failures. Individually, the data from these evaluations could derive from surveys where students rate the level to which they thought specific goals or aspirations were achieved. Highlander's goal is to increase social skills and life training knowledge, improve attitudes and behaviors. Thus, the outcome studies frequently use pre-post data and conceptualize goals and outcomes, leading to measurement and data collection. The gathered data can then be analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of group therapy's goals and results. Therefore, the summative evaluation of a program's outcome is the best way to evaluate the program's group therapy interventions' effectiveness.

Stakeholders

According to Smith (2010), it is essential for all consumers that contribute to the program to be evaluated to help ensure ethical practice and make programs accountable. Consumers are also known as stakeholders. The stakeholders' position consists of individuals who are financially invested in the program. The stakeholders within Highlander's program include tax-paying community members, building administrators, and parents or legal guardians of the program's attended students. It was noted that if the District would have to send these enrolled students to an out of district program, the finances result between 40K-60K per student, plus 18K

for transportation. Therefore, it is more cost-effective to have these students attend an in-district program. The community's tax-paying members provide the funds for these disabled students to have a thriving academic environment and services.

The different perspectives of this program's value and effectiveness are essential to dissect and understand because the program does cost money. However, the political situation can arise due to the program's different perspectives and not understanding the micro-level impact. For example, some individuals believe that services need to provide for these disabled students by supporting them financially. The opposed perspective is that individuals do not want to spend money on disabled students to have their needed services for success. The most effective way to manage the political challenge is by providing political consumers with evidence of how effective and beneficial this program is for the students. The evidence can be displayed in the students' progress reports. If the stakeholders view the interpret evidence data differently, it would be essential for the stakeholders to be educated on the disabilities the students have and practically understand how the offered clinical services impact the program's students. Therefore, this outcome evaluation can provide the data to demonstrate why this program is essential and how much of a difference it is making on the student's lives.

The writer evaluates as a social work intern to unbiasedly observe and see all the program's benefits second-hand with the students. Thus, a full-time staff member, such as the clinical licensed social workers within the program, would be a crucial perspective of the program evaluation because they are the core reason why the program is beneficial for the disabled students. The clinical services would not be sufficient and useful for the students without them. For instance, a building administrator would not provide the students with the

clinical mental health services related to the educational setting because they are not competent. The social workers are aware of the student's needs and aspirations and can provide them with social and life skills and training to help them achieve their post-secondary aspirations. The writer can conduct a summative evaluation at Highlander by assessing the program's group therapy benefits. The writer can also evaluate the mishaps and provide possible solutions to improve the program's purpose. It is possible that through this program evaluation assignment, the writer will be able to disclose the pros and cons of the program that might not have been revealed before. The social workers can reevaluate the group therapy session's purpose by developing and implementing solutions to result in better results or improved results of how they function in society after graduating from the program.

Method

Research Design

A pre-post design will be conducted in Highlander's group therapy outcome evaluation plan. The method is used to evaluate if the student utilizes social and life skills taught from group therapy and apply it to their lives after a year. The design will consist of testing the students at the beginning of the school year and then trying the same group again a year later. The model indicates that group therapy is "X". O1 refers to the observation of students beginning of the school year, which suggests the students' pre-test before they start group therapy. O2 refers to the observation of the same students at the beginning of the next school year, which indicates the students get post-tested after a year in group therapy. However, the seniors will be tested a year again after they graduate from the program. The underclassmen will be tested also after a year of completing group therapy. The pre-post study signifies a summative design to measure group

therapy outcomes and goals, which assess the students' development of behavioral management and emotional regulation progression. Thus, there will be a pre-test and post-test for each student's parent or guardian to be more sufficient. The parent or guardian insight will be useful because they will observe and share if they have seen any differences in their son or daughter's behavior at home.

There are a few possible threats to the internal validity of this design. Since the population is high school students with disabilities or mental health issues, predicaments can occur. A threat to this design could be program attrition. According to Smith (2010), program attrition refers to participants dropping out of the program. It is possible that students that started group therapy at the beginning of the school year do not complete the program because of dropping out of high school. For instance, there are possibilities for academics not being suited for students, so instead, they attend a trade school for the second half of the school year. If that happens, then the student would not be participating in the post-test survey. Another threat includes maturation. Smith (2010) stated that participants could mature over time, and the changes may not derive from the program. Therefore, it is possible that a student can grow in their behavior, which means they can better regulate their emotions. Thus, if a student's maturation growth experience happens before they take their post-test, then the results would not be tainted. In other words, maturation can impact the outcome if group therapy was effective or not.

Data Collection Procedures

Highlander's group therapy outcome evaluation plan will administer surveys and questionnaires to gather quantitative data from the students. The qualitative data collection

includes interviewing the parent or guardian of each student. The study or questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions and summated scales (Smith, 2010). However, there are advantages and disadvantages while administering surveys or questionnaires to the study's participants. The questionnaire's advantage is that it will be distributed electronically, which means there will be no interactional effects between interviewer and interviewee. According to Smith (2010), questionnaires consist of close-ended questions, which indicates that the results can be easily analyzed into percentages. As for a disadvantage, there can be a lack of participant responses electronically. However, Highlander can allow students to respond to the electronic questionnaire during a class period to get completed within a timely manner. Another disadvantage would be that the students do not complete the questionnaire honestly and openly. It is essential to consider that the participants are all diagnosed with a mental illness and are classified as emotionally disturbed. Thus, since the parent or guardian is receiving a survey, the disadvantage would be if the parent or guardian is not active in their child's life, which means they would not have accurate observations of their child's behavior.

Data Collection Instrument (Measurement)

The researcher will use the Group Therapy Assessment Rating as the standardized measurement tool in this outcome evaluation plan. The Group Therapy Assessment Rating provides a formal approach to evaluating change among the students at Highlander Academy. The Assessment Rating includes five factors: students' comprehension of group norms and rules, effective communication, emotional regulation, coping skills, and the ability to work on personal goals. Sample questions include: "you were able to identify and express your feelings during group therapy sessions", "you were able to abide by group norms", and "you were able to take

steps to achieve your personal goals". Responses to most questions are provided using a scale of most times, sometimes or not at all.

The validity of a previous questionnaire that was used for student feedback revealed that this measurement showed moderate ability to differentiate if group therapy has been effective or not. The questionnaire's reliability was consistently high for students in the study because you could identify the behavioral changes from the present compared to the beginning of the school year. It was noted that nineteen students were engaged and completed the study's questionnaire. However, three students did not complete the questionnaire because they had a high rate of school absences, or they were moved out of the district for educational services due to hospitalization from suicide ideation.

Sampling

Highlander Academy is considered as a small program. The plan consists of a non-probability sample that includes administering a survey to all the program students. Since there are a total of twenty-two students, then twenty-two surveys will be completed. Smith (2010) indicated that non-response could significantly impact a study in a small program. However, it is essential to allow the students to complete the survey in class electronically to have a specific time dedicated to finishing it.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

The researcher will distinguish the effectiveness of Highlander's group therapy treatment program for the students by conducting a descriptive analysis and evaluating a sample T-test.

The descriptive analysis consists of collecting the student's age, gender, sociodemographic, grade level, and psychiatric diagnosis or disability. It would be essential to consider the student's psychiatric diagnosis because group therapy is regarded as a treatment for mental health. The T-test analyses the pre-score of the students concerning the post-test of each student. The results are based on the mean scores from each student's pre-test and the post-test. Thus, the summative evaluation plan will consider the significant difference in the mean score of the students who attend Highlander's group therapy sessions.

Qualitative Data

In addition to the students' quantitative data, the students' parents or guardians will participate in a pre-test and post-test to collect more sufficient data about the changes or lack of changes in their behavior. Therefore, the interviewee will interview each parent or guardian on concise questions regarding their child's behavior. The purpose of collecting this qualitative data is to evaluate if the parent or guardian has noticed any changes in the child's behavior at home. This qualitative evaluation can help see if the parents think that the group therapy goals and objectives are being used and create a difference in their lives. Therefore, based on the information gathered, the researcher will examine the participants feedback on their child's behavior according to tendencies and patterns in the data. The process entails gathering and analyzing the information, identifying patterns, and categorizing behavioral themes. It was noted that the researcher would introduce qualitative data by providing precise information and observations received from the Highlander students' parent or guardian in the completed evaluation.

Findings and Implications

Overall, the outcome evaluation revealed positive results with most students at Highlander Academy. The group therapy program showed that it is effective and is needed to support the students with their mental health. Students achieved their individual objectives, which excelled in the group therapy program goals. Students could utilize the taught social skills and life skills from group therapy and apply it in their lives at home and in a work setting. Nineteen out of twenty-two students reached the goals of group therapy. Thus, nineteen students successfully maintained norms and rules in society or working environment, reduced inappropriate language in the community, reduced emotional outbreaks, and successfully handled difficult emotions, decrease stress, and establish or maintain a sense of internal order. Also, nineteen students built upon their strengths, obtained a job and did not allow personal challenges to disable them. However, it was reported that three students did not achieve the micro or macro-level objectives and goals from Highlander's group therapy sessions due to not attending school in-person or virtually. The outcome evaluation presents a vital role in identifying group therapy effectiveness on the students, and it is highly suggested to complete this summative evaluation once every year.

References

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